

## Professional Learning Communities: A Study of Teacher Team Leaders

This proposal is for a paper presentation in Division A, Administration and Leadership.

### *Purpose*

Four students and a faculty adviser in a doctoral program conducted action research to identify skills of professional learning community team leaders, administrative support of professional learning communities, and determine cultural changes due to professional learning communities.

### *Historical Perspective*

The historical perspective outlines issues of teacher isolation, characteristics of teacher leaders, encouraging teachers to be leaders, and high performance teams.

#### *Teacher Isolation*

Teacher isolation was rooted in busy workdays, closed doors, lack of flexible scheduling, and curriculum and assessment demands. High stakes accountability and high achievement expectations have also created a competitive environment where sharing has become non-existent (Mycue, 2001). The lack of an environment and working together had exacerbated teacher isolation, which is not a new phenomenon.

Teachers were motivated to participate in PLCs when the tasks were directly linked to the work with students. Tasks that took away limited time and resources without offering something in return prevented teachers from being willing and motivated participants in a PLC (Bakkenes, de Brabander, & Imants, 1999).

#### *Characteristics of Teacher Leaders*

If leaders were in higher-level positions, they tended to show traits closely aligned to the organization's hierarchy in a formal manner, where as those in positions of lower responsibility displayed traits more closely associated in a relational manner and worked in a more informal manner. The recurring theme throughout was that every member of an organization had the potential to influence a group dynamic (Ogawa, 1995).

Buckner (2000) explained that most teachers did not receive leadership skills in teacher preparation courses. To lead teams successfully, teachers had to be able to develop a number of traits. With professional development and/or administrative feedback, teachers became productive team leaders. Among the top of these was promoting a caring attitude, which, in teams, can be shown through good listening skills and ability to restate, draw out information from group members and making good eye contact (Buckner, 2000). Teacher leaders who were the most effective had to interact effectively with students, their peers, parents and administrators and develop trust (Rogus, 1988).

#### *Encouraging Teachers to be Leaders*

Lambert (2003) found that teachers, who were hesitant, had past disappointments. In order to engage these teachers, the administrator must know the person's goals and interests. Administrators also needed to be aware of teacher assigned duties and eliminate overload, as necessary (Lambert, 2003). Teachers needed to be secure in their belief that the principal would provide an environment safe from criticism, as well as give encouragement and feedback (Danielson, 2007). Administrators needed to provide opportunities to help the teacher build leadership skills in areas such as collaboration, test building, curriculum, and facilitation (Danielson; Wade & Ferriter, 2007).

### *High Performance Teams (Team Building)*

Many schools created teams; however, they did not provide training and an infrastructure (Hackman et al., 2002). In their study, principals revealed that teams needed time to evolve and at least four to five years together to function at the optimum level. In addition to training, infrastructure, and time, the teams needed support from fellow teachers and the building administrators. The goal of organizations was to build effective teams in order to raise productivity within the organization. Katzenbach (1998) stated that major events helped build capacity in teams. DuFour and associates (2005) stated that teams became high functioning when they participated in collaborative conversation. Katzenbach (1998) reported that collective work caused the team to come together, because they needed each other to accomplish the task at hand.

### *Problem Statement*

The implementation of PLCs has created a need for teachers to become leaders and work in a collaborative teaming environment. For this to successfully occur, teachers must be trained and become proficient in interpersonal, collaboration, and teaming skills. Several schools have not provided the training and resources for teachers to develop these skills.

Three questions guided the research:

1. What skills do professional learning community team leaders possess?
2. What is the role of school district administrators in the support of professional learning communities?
3. How has the culture of Buhler USD 313 changed as a result of the implementation of professional learning communities?

### *Research Design*

This participatory action research, as described by Patton (2002), used qualitative methodology. Stringer (1999; 2004) described participatory research as democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing. It allows for all to participate and acknowledges their worthiness to the research study.

Research data collection methodologies included interviews, focus groups, observations, and document review. Participants were chosen for their expertise in the topic being studied, a process termed purposive sampling by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993).

*Participants* for this research included teacher team leaders, building principals, superintendent and associate superintendent. Also, teachers on selected teams were observed during their normally scheduled team meetings.

*Interviews* are an interactive process between the researcher and the participant that allows the story to be told in narrative form (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Patton (1990) described interviews as informal conversational, interview guide approach, standardized open-ended, and closed, fixed response. We chose the interview guide approach as it allows for consistency of protocol items but provides researchers the latitude to choose the sequence and wording of the questions. The field study team interviewed six principals and two district administrators. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

*Focus groups* are designed for listening and gathering information from a selected group of participants. Krueger and Casey (2000) described the social setting of a focus group as one that encourages all participants to share but does not pressure them to reach consensus. The members of the group impact each other by building on the responses of other participants. Groups should be conducted with six to eight people by an experienced

interviewer. The field study team conducted four focus groups of 34 team leaders. Each focus group will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted in Buhler USD 313 facilities.

Spradley (1980) stated that the passive participation in *observations* allows data collection without researcher involvement in the proceedings. We conducted passive observations during normally scheduled meetings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (2001) considered *document review* as a low cost, stable source of data. Documents are non-reactive and create a triangulation of data with from focus groups or interviews (Lincoln & Guba). Merriman as well as Erlandson and associates (1993) emphasized that data gleaned from documents can be treated just like data from interviews and observations. During the research, the study team will review documents, such as meeting agendas and minutes.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using the constant comparative method, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This method compares the data until categories and themes emerge. This process was facilitated by the use of FileMakerPro software.

#### *Story of Professional Learning Communities*

Creating professional learning communities has several positive effects at the district and building level. Student learning is the focus in a district that utilizes this practice. It is therefore very important for schools to continually monitor student progress and keep this information at the forefront of every PLC meeting. Another key point is to continually review and update common assessments, matching them to state standards and state assessments. Constant monitoring allows for teachers to share strategies and innovations that will allow every student to learn.

Professional learning communities help to increase communication among teachers and enhanced professional relationships. This creates a sense of pride throughout the district and a commitment to help students and teachers alike to experience success. The district should continue to find ways to bring staff together to keep building the positive relationships and the feelings of pride for what they are all accomplishing.

Current PLCs are mainly collaboration of grade level and content area teams. This has been very beneficial in creating a guaranteed curriculum and continuity between schools. It is just as important to collaborate as an entire building and kindergarten through twelfth grade throughout the district. The guaranteed curriculum would not only be aligned at each grade level but also from one grade to the next. This is an area that the district may decide to investigate.

The teacher leaders have felt supported as they lead PLC teams. Ongoing professional development is critical to the success of not only the teacher leaders, but also team members and administration. Leaders utilize skills that come naturally and skills that are acquired through the professional development activities. It is important for school districts utilizing professional learning communities to ensure that a systematic means of ongoing training for the leadership (administration and teacher leaders) is in place.

The teacher leaders have a strong sense of the skills they currently rely upon to lead their teams. Additionally, they indicate a need to continue to enhance certain skills. Still others feel inadequate in their development of leadership skills. For the teams to reach their

full potential, teacher leaders must feel confident in their abilities to create a team climate that includes high expectations, consistent and equitable team member contributions, and overall team accountability. Further professional development and administrative support for the leaders in the area goal setting, facilitating productive conversations, and delegation to other team members will enhance the overall team effectiveness.

#### *Implications*

*Schools that implement professional learning communities tend to have an increase of communication among staff.*

*Professional learning communities tend to make students the focal point of the learning environment.*

*Time expended on district-level professional learning communities have a propensity to reduce time available for building-level collaboration.*

*Professional learning community teacher leaders tend to experience insufficient time to accomplish a full teaching load and leadership duties.*

*Teacher leaders of professional learning communities tend to require ongoing professional development.*

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